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*A Correspondent in Saigon*

by George Eagle

To get the meaning, and to learn how to read official reports of the war in Vietnam skeptically, readers need an enterprising, driving reporter who will go see for himself and who won't settle for Pentagon or State Department versions of what's going on. David Halberstam gave this kind of reporting to

*The Making of a Quagmire*  
by David Halberstam  
(Random House; \$5.95)

*The New York Times* for 15 months, and he, along with Malcolm Browne of the Associated Press, got a Pulitzer Prize for the job. Unfortunately, great reporting does not a great book make, and *The Making of a Quagmire* is on the whole deficient as an account of the war and how it grew.

One reason is that a war does not stand still while a book gets written and published. Carrying of the war to North Vietnam, the consequent diversion of attention from the guerrilla war in the South, and shifts in the South Vietnamese government and its attitudes have taken a good deal of see-it-now zing from a book that depends on timeliness.

Halberstam brings little analysis to the Vietnamese agony as history, and probably did not mean to. He fully supports the US presence in strength in South Vietnam. He does conclude from what he has seen that the American effort in South Vietnam looks like a failure, indeed may have been doomed as long ago as 1951, but he implores that the lessons of Vietnam be learned for national-liberation wars yet to come: "There is something to the Viet Cong besides the terror, something more to winning a revolutionary war than helicopters."

The first half of *The Making of a Quagmire* is a patchwork of scraps from a correspondent's notebook including experiences in the Congo, which Halberstam covered, at age 27, before going East. The book ends about midway with a chapter about a

remarkable American adviser-officer, Lt. Col. John Vann, who could see what was going wrong in the paddy war of the Mekong River Delta, but who couldn't get a hearing from above, even when he came home and went to the Pentagon, where one would expect them to be interested in reports from the field. Vann finally quit the Army, much as he loved it.

Halberstam admires Henry Cabot Lodge as an Ambassador in Saigon and characterizes Lodge's predecessor, Frederick Nolting, as a good man who staked too much in a Ngo Dinh Diem regime that would not return the trust. Halberstam, who used to be a reporter in Mississippi and Tennessee, is reminded by Nolting of Southern white community leaders who, when their communities were about to explode in racial disorders, "reassured me that all was well, that the Negroes were satisfied with the status quo, that the problem was entirely the work of outside agitators and that writing about it would only make the situation worse. These men had no contact with the Negro community except for what their maids or hired people told them. . . ."

Halberstam also sees a parallel to the civil rights movement in the way the Diem regime leaned on the Buddhists:

"Often the government broke up their demonstrations with violence and bloodshed, and as Bull Connor and his police dogs in Birmingham were to etch indelibly the civil rights movement in the minds of millions of Americans, so the Buddhists used the government's repeated clumsiness to commit their people further to their cause and to strengthen the movement."

Halberstam holds the Central Intelligence Agency in generally high regard for its work in South Vietnam; he sees John Richardson, former CIA chief in the country, as an honest and dedicated

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man who got so close to Ngo Dinh Nhu and so committed to the policy of backing the Ngos at all costs, that the CIA leaders became "part of the team" instead of gatherers and appraisers of intelligence from all sources.

The book contains probably the most thorough accounts yet published of Nhu's raids on the pagodas - the State Department finally backed down from its insistence that the South Vietnamese Army and not Nhu was responsible - and the *coup d'etat* that finished Nhu and Diem. However, Halberstam brushes over the degree of American involvement, saying Lodge and the CIA knew a coup was coming, promised no aid to the plotters and tried to get Diem to accept a safe-conduct offer.

Taken as a complete work, *The Making of a Quagmire* is choppily constructed and written in the nondescript style of a journeyman journalist. If nothing else, however, it stands as a memorial to a small group of reporters stationed in Vietnam who bucked pressures from the White House on down to report, at a time of official optimism, that South Vietnam and the US were

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